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AUTHOR Moriarty, Thomas
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ABSTRACT

The paper describes a field experiment conducted at Jones Beach, New York, to determine (1) how responsive are individuals who witness a crime, and (2) under what conditions will bystanders take action to prevent a crime. The major independent variable in this study was the degree of prior commitment to the victim; whether or not the subject had agreed to watch the victim's belongings. Results obtained from the 56 subjects placed in the experimental conditions indicate that in the absence of prior commitment to the victim, only 20% of the subjects were responsive; under conditions of commitment, the result was clearly reversed and 95% of the subjects were responsive and intervened in the theft. The author feels that the dramatic effect of even mild commitment on the part of the bystander is a positive, heartening result at a point in time when evidence of public apathy and indifference abound.
(Author/SES)

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Crime, Commitment and the Responsive Bystander

Thomas Moriarty

New York University

Abstract

During the Summer, 1972, 56 thefts were staged (a portable radio taken from an unattended blanket) at Jones Beach, New York. Subjects agreeing to watch the victim's belongings were more likely to notice the thefts; among those noticing the theft, committed subjects were more likely to stop the theft.

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Crime, Commitment and the Responsive Bystander

Thomas Moriarty

New York University

Crime is a major social problem today. Not only does the crime rate continue to increase year by year, but the quality of crime has changed as well. Criminal activity, once confined to deserted streets and the hours of darkness, now occurs with considerable frequency in broad daylight, in full view of passersby. Much publicity has been given in recent years to those incidents in which crimes are committed while innocent bystanders do nothing to help the victim. The well-known case of Kitty Genovese, who was stabbed to death while many individuals passively looked on, has caused a good deal of concern about the degree of apathy in our society.

In some measure, the unresponsiveness of bystanders may be responsible for the qualitative change in criminal activity. Visibility has always been one major deterrent to crime; to the extent that individuals intent on criminal activity take into account the presence of others who might interfere with the act, the activity will be inhibited. On the other hand, to the extent that such individuals can expect non-interference from unresponsive bystanders, visibility is no longer a deterrent to crime.

A field experiment was conducted at Jones Beach, New York to determine:

- a) how responsive are individuals who witness a crime, and
- b) under what conditions will bystanders take action to prevent the crime?

The experiment involved staging a number of thefts in which a portable radio is taken from an unattended beach blanket, and noting the subsequent behavior of those at the scene of the crime. The major independent variable in this study is the degree of prior commitment to the victim--

whether or not the subject has agreed to watch the victim's belongings.

Subjects: On six weekdays in July and August, 1972, 56 beach-goers were selected for study. The selection was guided by two considerations:

a) The sampling unit was the beach blanket rather than the individual. For each experimental treatment, quotas were established which reflected typical groupings: male alone; female alone; male and female pairs; adults with children. This was done to assure diversity within each condition, while minimizing diversity between conditions.

b) Subjects were also selected with respect to apparent age, and an attempt was made to balance this factor in the two conditions. Post experimental interviews with the subjects revealed that the sample in the present study was indeed heterogeneous with respect to age, education and occupation. Ages ranged from 14 to 60 years, with an average of 33 years; educationally, subjects ran the gamut from elementary school through professional training.

Despite the heterogeneity of the total sample, the resulting profiles are strikingly similar in the two experimental groups, and the results to be reported cannot be attributed to the minor differences which do exist.

Procedure: With the aid of two experimental confederates, a theft was staged in full-view of the subject. In each case, the Confederate Victim (hereafter called the Victim) placed his blanket within five feet of the subject, turned on his portable radio to a local rock station (at a fairly high volume). After reclining for 1-2 minutes, the Victim left his blanket and spoke briefly to the subject. The independent variable, Commitment, was manipulated at this point.

a) In the Commitment Condition, the Victim said to the subject: "Excuse me, I'm going up to the boardwalk for a few minutes...would you watch my things? (The subject invariable agreed to the request.)

b) In the No Commitment Condition, the Victim said: "Excuse me... I'm here alone and have no matches. Do you have a light? (The purpose of this dialogue was primarily to establish for the subject that the Victim was alone, while providing some interaction between the subject and the Victim.)

In either case, the Victim then strolled away in the direction of the boardwalk and remained out of sight.

Two or three minutes later, the Confederate Thief walked up to the Victim's blanket, picked up the portable radio (which was still playing loudly) and quickly walked away in a direction opposite to that taken by the Victim. Unless stopped by the subject, the Thief continued up to the boardwalk and remained out of sight. The reactions of the subject to the theft were noted by an observer who had stationed himself behind the subject earlier. The observer feigned sleep during the theft, and in no case did the subject attempt to interact with the observer or enlist his aid.

The confederates were white, in their middle twenties; one confederate was male, the other female, and they alternated in the roles of thief and victim throughout the study. Both were dressed in usual beach attire.

Results:

a. Noticing the theft: The dependent variable is, of course, the response of the subject to the theft. In spite of our attempts to make the

theft obvious to the subject there are many visual distractions at the beach which might prevent the subject from noticing the theft. Of the 56 subjects, 16 maintained during the post experimental interview that they had not noticed the radio being taken. Although there is no way to be certain that the subjects were being truthful, it is interesting to note that those who failed to notice were in the No Commitment Condition. On the other hand, all subjects in the Commitment Condition noticed the theft.

The results which follow are based only on those cases where the subject did notice the radio being taken, and involve 40 subjects divided equally between the Commitment and No Commitment Conditions.

b. Responsiveness: Generally two distinct patterns of behavior emerged in response to the theft, and these were classified as "Responsive" and "Unresponsive." In the latter case, the subject typically watched the Thief take the radio, and continued watching the Thief until he was gone from view. This was classified as unresponsive, since it is clear that had the theft been genuine, it would also have been successful. Although all such subjects accurately described the Thief to the Victim when the latter returned, they had done nothing to prevent the theft from taking place.

The responsive pattern, on the other hand, typically involved calling to the thief to stop (which he did not do); getting up and chasing the thief to stop him; demanding an explanation from the Thief. This pattern was fairly standard and while the subject was questioning the Thief, the observer stopped the interaction, explained the true nature of the situation, and conducted the post-experimental interview.

The effect of commitment on the relative occurrence of the two patterns is clear:

a. In the absence of prior commitment to the victim, only 4 of the 20 subjects (20%) were "responsive." Thus, 80% of the thefts in this condition were successful.

b. Under conditions of commitment to the victim, the result is clearly reversed: of the 20 subjects, 19 (95%) were "responsive;" only one failed to intervene. Thus, when the subject committed himself to the Victim, the theft was prevented in most cases.

NOTE: A TWO-MINUTE FILM OF SELECTED SUBJECTS IN THE STUDY WILL BE SHOWN AT THIS POINT. THE FILM DEMONSTRATES TYPICAL PATTERNS OF RESPONSE AND REINFORCES THE FINDINGS IN THE PRESENT STUDY.

Implications and Conclusions: The fact that subjects in the No Commitment Condition did not intervene is, unfortunately, not surprising. What is surprising in the present study is that Commitment has such a dramatic effect. Commitment in this situation was indeed mild. The request was a simple one and no subject hesitated in granting it. Perhaps the subjects were merely being courteous to the Victim, and did not really expect anything to come of it. The initial shock and surprise evidenced by the subjects when the theft occurred supports this interpretation. At a point in history when evidence of public apathy and indifference abound, it is heartening to find that this mild manipulation was so effective in producing a "responsive" bystander.